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ABSTRACT

This paper explores notions of empowerment, as variously constructed in contemporary educational discourse, in an attempt to better understand what it means to adopt empowering rhetoric. The discussion is framed around three questions: (1) What is empowerment in contemporary educational discourse? (2) What is desirable, and what should teachers be empowered for? and (3) What is possible and, realistically, what can be achieved? The paper begins with a brief etymological analysis of the term "empowerment." In this section, it is concluded that the use of the term itself implies the acceptance of certain assumptions about power and power relations. Next, the term "teacher empowerment," as it is used in teaching and teacher education, is examined. References are made to conservative, liberal humanist, and critical educational discourses and specific notions of teacher empowerment are clarified. Reference is made to the structure/agency debate in contempoarary social theory in order to demonstrate some issues and problems of empowerment rhetoric. Recent work in poststructuralism and postmodernism, which offer an alternative notion of power, are considered. (JD)

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Agency, structure and the rhetoric of teacher empowerment

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As a teacher and, more recently, as a teacher educator the notion of teacher empowerment is appealing. In both occupations there have been moments when I have felt powerless, blocked, and frustrated in my attempts to act. Given that I am often positioned in antagonistic relations vis-a-vis men, the student teachers with whom I work, school administrators, and others, the prospect of being able to alter power relations is attractive. My main interest in empowerment is therefore political. I believe that the conditions of teachers' lives and work should be altered and so would like to find ways to change power relations within teaching and teacher education.

However teacher empowerment increasingly is becoming yet another slogan of contemporary educational discourse, (like action research, reflective teaching and critical thinking), used for diverse purposes and with varied meanings. The more familiar I have become with the literature on teacher empowerment, the more problematic it has seemed. Thus, my central task in this paper is to explore notions of empowerment, as variously constructed in contemporary educational discourses, in an attempt to better understand what it means to adopt empowerment rhetoric, and other practices, as my own. I frame the discussion around three questions: what <u>is</u> empowerment in contemporary educational discourse?; what is <u>desirable</u>, what do we wish to empower teachers for?; and what is <u>possible</u>, realistically, what can be achieved?

I commence the paper with a brief etymological analysis of the term empowerment. In this section I conclude that the use of the term itself implies the acceptance of certain assumptions about power and power relations. Next I examine the term teacher empowerment as it is used in teaching and teacher education literature. I make reference to conservative,

liberal humanist, and critical[1] educational discourses and attempt to clarify, through both immanent and transcendent critique, their notions of teacher empowerment. I refer to the structure/agency debate in contemporary social theory in order to demonstrate some issues and problems of empowerment rhetoric. I also draw on recent work in poststructuralism and postmodernism which offers an alternative notion of power that might help us to think through teacher empowerment.

Of the empowerment discourses I focus on the critical because of the way in which empowerment is embraced as central to its broader project of emancipation. Here, I argue that empowerment fits within a discourse of possibility rather than a discourse of critique which helps explain why critical educational theory is still struggling to move the rhetoric of teacher empowerment toward reality. Locked within dualisms of structure/agency, dominant/subordinate, power-ful/power-less, the critical project might, I suggest, be more fruitful if poststructural critiques which emphasize multiplicity, contradiction and context are considered. While I support, in general and abstract terms, the emancipatory project of critical educational discourse, I call for greater self-reflection about our rhetoric and practices and much more attention to the particular contexts within which we work.

A brief etymology

It is important to consider what is structured into the very term empowerment. First, to "empower" denotes to give authority, to enable, to license. Empowerment embodies a notion of power as external, power which can be given, which can be provided, power as property. That is, if it is possible to em-power, then power must be something which can be controlled,

held, conferred, taken away. Second, although the meaning of "power" in empowerment is certainly open to interpretation, we cannot escape an agent of empowerment, even if that agent is the self. Third, empowerment also implies an end state, a result, THE TEACHER IS NOW EMPOWERED! Hence it implies some goal or vision. So even if empowerment is used to describe a process, we can assume that it is a process toward some end.

Although the term empowerment contains a particular notion of power (power as property), requires an agent, and implies a vision of some kind, it is important to acknowledge that the meanings of words are always "up for grabs", that there are no essential meanings, only ascribed meanings. Social definitions of terms are products of the contexts surrounding their use and the discourses in which they are embedded. In the next section of the paper I situate works of particular writers in discourses which use the term teacher empowerment and raise questions on the basis of this brief etymological analysis. For example, what does it mean for an educational discourse to adopt a term which embodies a notion of power as ownership or property? Can the term empowerment be compatible with a range of discourses? In a discourse which considers power among teachers, students and other social positions to be circulating, pervasive, contradictory, shifting, such as poststructuralism, does it even make sense to speak of teacher empowerment? Also, who is to be the empowering agent of teachers? And what results from the exercise of power in the name of empowering others?

Teacher empowerment in use

At one extreme among teacher empowerment discourses we find literature which equates teacher empowerment with professionalization. For example, in Gene Maeroff's (1988) recent book The Empowerment of Teachers, strategies for

empowering teachers include schemes like "the teacher of the year", and providing teachers with business cards thus conferring "a kind of dignity that the teachers never before had enjoyed" (Maeroff, 1988, p.20). According to Maeroff, empowering teachers requires that they are "raised in status, made more competent at their craft, and given entree to the decision-making process" (p.xiii) [emphasis added]. This notion of empowerment clearly assumes an external agent who does these things for or to teachers. There is no sense of teachers empowering themselves.

Other usages of teacher empowerment rest on assumptions of human potential and emphasize the "enhancement of human possibility" (Simon, 1987). These accounts range from liberal humanist (e.g. Yonemura, 1986) to critical theories (e.g. Giroux, McLaren, Simon) which vary greatly in terms of their attention to social structures and the focus of their projects. (elaborate a little)

"Empowerment" as constructed by discourses of professionalization

Maeroff (1988) self consciously equates the term empowerment with professionalization and emphasizes the need for teachers to act, and be treated, as professionals. His book is really a report on a nation wide project, CHART (Collaboratives for Humanities and Arts Teaching), which provided inservice instruction and additional pay to selected volunteer teachers. The project's goal was to "enhance the teaching profession by giving teachers more respectability, authority, and status" (p.15). Maeroff's view of empowerment is individualistic. Although he emphasizes collegiality and collaborative projects he also supports teachers competing with each other to have their ideas recognized and glorifies the individual recognition accorded to teachers who were selected to be a part of the CHART

project. His is an authoritarian or "instrumentalist" (Fay, 1977) model of social change which assumes that "because of their expertise, some members of the social order should control others" (Fay, 1977, p.203). Empowerment is clearly to be defined by those who are already in positions of authority within the school system. To illustrate, Maeroff (1988) states:

> There is nothing about empowerment that precludes consultation with authorities. It certainly appears worth the risk to give teachers more control over curriculum development . But the product ought to be carefully monitored. (p.55)

Furthermore, he suggests that if teachers (individuals) commit themselves to doing extra work and improving their practices they ought to be given:

> concrete promises of empowerment--greater freedom to choose textbooks, a place on a curriculum-writing team, an assurance of being called upon to mentor a younger colleague, the promise of released time to attend seminars regularly. (p.46)

This view of empowerment is also conservative in its maintenance of existing power relations in schools. Although he talks of giving teachers "access to power", the emphasis is on opening channels of communication between teachers and administrators rather than, for instance, challenging the existing hierarchy. Moreover empowerment is not linked to any particular vision of the future; it is emptied of content except to "improve learning" by improving teacher performance. Maeroff says "giving teachers greater power is a major way to make them more professional and to improve their performance" (p.4) and

> Empowerment, of course, is not an end in itself. If teachers who gain more power over their work situation do not end up doing their jobs better, then empowerment will mean little or nothing as far as the education of children is concerned.... The improvement of learning should be the goal of empowerment. (p.106)

Maeroff's book can be located within a neo-conservative discourse which emphasizes the intellectual and has the effect of blaming teachers and their "self imposed shackles of low self esteem" (p.6) for the current "crisis" in schools. This position asserts the need for superficial changes to existing arrangements which boil down to making teachers "better" at implementing goals of authorities. It embodies a view of power as overt and public, able to be given by people in positions of institutional authority. This discourse of empowerment clearly maintains a dualism of structure and agency with the current structure defended as being <u>for</u> kids and with agency as subservient to the structure. All the while the dualism is unchallenged. I would not have dwelled on Maeroff's work had it not provided such a vivid contrast to other discourses of empowerment.

"Empowerment" as constructed by discourses of liberal humanism

Margaret Yonemura (1986) writes of "the satisfaction and empowerment which derive from the adventures of minds that are freed to think" (p.474) and bringing her own experiences to bear on the concept, argues that preservice teachers can be empowered by involvement in the invention of curricula, ongoing peer relations, and through child study. Hers is clearly a liberal humanist conception of empowerment which is somewhat educative, to use Brian Fay's (1977) term, in that there is an emphasis on the process. This discourse of empowerment is linked to emancipation but locked within an

individualism which, although potentially altering power relations within the classroom, does little to address the institutional and societal arrangements which limit the possibilities of teachers' work. Walkerdine (1985) argues that accounts of schooling, like this one, "which deny power and desire in a humanistic conception of nurturance serve to keep us locked inside a powerful fiction of autonomy and possibility" (p.238). (elaborate a little here too)

"Empowerment" as constructed by discourses in critical educational theory

The placement of this discourse of empowerment after the professionalization and liberal humanist discourses is somewhat contradictory given that the concern for teacher empowerment first emerged within teacher education literature in critical educational theory. It seems to me clear that conservative thinkers have appropriated the term for their own uses within more mainstream discourses. This is not to suggest that the critical discourse of empowerment is therefore more pure or disinterested; on the contrary, as I shall argue in this section of the paper, there are a number of crucial tensions and contradictions within this discourse. Before articulating some of these, I will lay out central features of the critical discourse.

Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren and Roger Simon are easily identified as major advocates of a third version of teacher empowerment, one which is located within critical educational discourse[2]. A crucial difference between this notion of empowerment and those already discussed is clear in the following statement: "To propose a pedagogy is to propose a political vision" (Simon, 1987, p.371). This view of teacher empowerment has considers itself to have a particular political vision of the future, one which is aimed at "the

enhancement of human possibility" (Simon, 1987, p.372) within a larger project of transforming the relation between "human capacities and social forms" (Simon, 1987, p.373). McLaren (1988) chooses for himself the label "critical educator" and, speaking for his colleagues, explains that when such people use the term empowerment they refer to "enabling students to do more than simply adapt to the social order but rather to be able to transform the social order in the interests of social justice, equality, and the development of a socialist democracy" (p.3).

This view of empowerment makes clear and deliberate links to the work of Paulo Friere who attempted to enhance the capacity of Brazilian peasants to take control over their own lives. His was an approach to empowerment which Fay (1977) has considered exemplary of "educative" models of social change. Unlike instrumentalist models which Fay describes as "manipulative and authoritarian", the educative model considers that

> theoretical knowledge is useful to the extent that it informs people what their needs are and how a particular way of living is frustrating these needs, thereby causing them to suffer; its goal is to enlighten people about how they can change their lives so that, having arrived at a new self-understanding, they may reduce their suffering by creating another way of life that is more fulfilling. (p.204).

Fay (1987) provides a view of empowerment as one element of the tripartite process -- enlightenment, empowerment, emancipation -- of practicing critical social science: As such empowerment

> has emancipation as its goal. The whole point of a critical theory is to redress a situation in which a group is experiencing deep but remedial suffering as a result of the way their lives are arranged. Its aim is to

> overturn these arrangements and to put into place another set in which people can relate and act in fuller, more satisfying ways. (Fay, 1987, p.29)

Again, we find empowerment linked to a particular political vision where, more than a method for participation (Simon, 1987, p.375) or an end in itself, it is ostensibly only a means to an end. For Simon, (and others) this end is "a project of possibility" which "requires an education rooted in a view of human freedom as the understanding of necessity and the transformation of necessity" (p.375). We find a dualism of means and ends maintained here even though Simon (1987) has attempted to move out of the structure /agency dualism, as is apparent in his claim that we need to engage in "the simultaneous struggle to change both our circumstances and ourselves" (p.384).

This view of empowerment is in stark contrast to that found in Maeroff's and even Yonemura's work, whereby "empowerment" has been co-opted in ways which ignore its historical roots and strip it of emancipatory political content. Without specific emancipatory content, empowerment can become a tool, a process, which is open to abuse. Without specific emancipatory content empowering student teachers could mean sitting everyone in a circle and ensuring that each person has a turn to speak while maintaining existing authoritarian relations in the classroom.

Although the critical discourse offers some vision of the future, as we can see the question of "empowerment for what?" still lacks clarity. What <u>is</u> "emancipatory" content? Ellsworth (1988) argues that the critical discourse on empowerment provides answers which are "ahistorical and depoliticized abstractions" (p.6). To make the argument, Ellsworth cites claims of

empowerment: for "human betterment", for expanding "the range of possible social identities people may become" and "making one's self present as part of a moral and political project that links production of meaning to the possibility for human agency, democratic community, and transformative social action" (Ellsworth, 1988, p.6). But where does it leave us, and me as a teacher educator, to exhort "critical educators" to move "beyond providing descriptive accounts of alternative educational policies and pedagogical practices in order to work towards founding a redemptive and radically utopian social imagination grounded in hope" (McLaren, 1988, p.9) ??!! Given that it would seem much easier to know how to act within the kind of conservative discourse that Maeroff provides, and that it is common to feel paralyzed by the kind of statement above, it is not difficult to understand why Maeroff would have wider appeal within an educational community which has as its basis, its purpose, practice/"doing stuff".

One reason for the abstractness of critical educational discourse may be that empowerment moves beyond a discourse of critique into a discourse of possibility. Clearly, within critical educational theory, the term empowerment is used "in the spirit of critique" (Simon, 1987, p.374), that is, implying a critique of oppressive or unjust relations or conditions which limit human action, feeling or thought (Simon, 1987). However, more than critique, the usage of the term empowerment suggests movement toward altering those unjust relations and conditions. This is part of a general shift in critical educational discourse toward acknowledging that education has played a major role in social movement and not just in social reproduction (Wexler, 1987). Empowerment rhetoric is a step beyond earlier critical "resistance" theories (Apple, 1979; McRobbie, 1978; Willis, 1977)

to the advocacy of other forms of opposition which can be labelled "counter-hegemonic" (Weiler, 1988) following Gramsci (1971). There has been movement beyond encouraging teachers to recognize the structural constraints under which they work to having them also acknowledge "the potential inherent in teaching for transformative and political work " (Weiler, 1988, p.52).

I believe that its location within a discourse of possibility also accounts for other tensions and contradictions within the critical discourse of empowerment. Within the discourse of possibility there is a strong sense of agency. McLaren (1988) uses the term "critical agency" to mean "action undertaken to minimise and attenuate the sphere of necessity and to maximise the sphere of freedom... Students must be allowed to exercise their right to self-production in a critical and socially responsible manner" (p.2). But who is to determine what is socially responsible? Prescriptions for action seem antithetical to the critical intent of people taking control over their own lives and situations. If we make claims to moral superiority or emancipatory authority we risk the arrogance of assuming that we can say for others what they need. As Fay (1977) put it:

> One cannot impose on another person a new attitude or belief, or create a situation in which the person has no choice but to accept this new belief, and at the same time claim that his [sic] acceptance is due to critical reflection. This is just a straightforward contradiction between objective and method, (p.227)

a contradiction which can lead to accusations of indoctrination and manipulation.

Lather (1989) makes the poststructuralist arguments that "no discourse is innocent of the Nietzschean will to power" (p.17), and that "whether the goal of one's work is prediction, understanding or emancipation, all are" (p.17), to use Foucault's term, 'regimes of truth'(p.19). Lather (1989) points out the danger in asking questions about oppression and emancipation while focussing little on the privileged position from which those questions are raised. For example then, when Aronowitz and Giroux (1985) assert that teachers should "be prepared to struggle and take risks in fighting against injustices however deeply ingrained that may be in the schools and other social spheres" (p.161) we must ask what it means to implore teachers to take such risks from the relative comfort (or at least the very different circumstances) of their/our academic positions.

The dilemma of who is to determine what is socially responsible reveals itself with a number of specific concerns, concerns which the critical discourse of empowerment does not/ cannot answer. For example, "Who is in a position to define oppression?" As Ellsworth (1988) points out, the "critical pedagogues" are unwilling to specify their ends, except in abstract ways. What is empowerment? Indeed, given that the critical notion of empowerment, rests on a critique of oppression, what is oppression? Are teachers oppressed by requirements to write lesson plans or supervise playgrounds? Are they oppressed by the way in which schools are organized which isolates them from each other, leaves little or no time for activities outside of the endorsed curricula of the school, and promotes competition rather than collegiality among teachers (Freedman, Jackson & Boles, 1982; Weiler, 1988)?

Furthermore, if empowerment is a step toward emancipation, what is emancipation? Cherryholmes (1988), employing post-structural and "critical pragmatic" methods, asks if emancipation is categorically distinct from oppression:

> Desire for emancipation is a response to social injustice and oppression, yet movement toward emancipation is likely to require coercion that some (those not being emancipated) may find oppressive, because they will be deprived of opportunities and advantages to which they believe they are entitled. Coercion seems to be necessary for emancipation while simultaneously subverting emancipation....Which forms of domination (coercion, constraint) are justified in furthering which forms of emancipation? (p.165)

While I would argue whether coercion is necessary for emancipation, thus questioning the zero-sum assumption made here, Cherryholmes nevertheless raises the sorts of questions I ask as a practitioner: Am I doing what is right for these students? How can I know? Who am I, to do this to them? (But here I find myself using the language I have available, a language which is unable to transcend the superiority of which I am critical).

Another tension that arises from critical empowerment discourse is, how much freedom is there/can there be within the institutional and pedagogical exigencies of teaching and teacher education? Walkerdine (1986) argues that "the forms of pedagogy necessary to the maintenance of order, the regulation of populations, demand a self-regulating individual and a notion of freedom as freedom from overt control. Yet such a notion of freedom is a sham". Walkerdine (1986) concludes that the concept of liberation as freedom from coercion is central to the concept of the bourgeois individual. These

arguments lead me to ask whether the critical empowerment discourse, with its rhetoric of collective action, really moves away from the individualism found in the professionalization and liberal discourses outlined earlier? Is the critical discourse just another part of the historical shift "from overt regulation of the population to apparatuses of covert regulation which depend upon the production of self-regulating, rational individuals" (Walkerdine, 1985, p.204)? Schools and institutions of higher education are constituted by such apparatuses of regulation.

Walkerdine (1985) continues that "power and powerlessness can be understood as aspects of the regulation of practices themselves and not as unitary or simple possession" (p.218). She gives the example that mothers do not possess power by virtue of simply being in authority, but that "power exists in the apparatuses of regulation themselves" (p.220). Power as contradictory, fragmentary and shifting is portrayed vividly in Kathryn Pauly Morgan's (1988?) analysis of "the paradox of the bearded mother" in feminist pedagogy. She argues that feminist teachers are expected to be "bearded" in the sense that they are expected to embody and display the forms of rationality, modes of cognition and critical lucidity that have been seen to be the monopoly of men (while questioning these very things) and at the same moment, "mothers" in the sense that they are expected to offer unconditional maternal nurturance and support. How are our own ideas of empowerment, and our actions, regulated by our social/institutional positioning(s)? How do we help others to feel empowered when we have to rely on our authority and privilege to do so, and which sets us in a specifically contradictory position? And how do we avoid that type of authority within the institutions where we work?

The many questions raised above are not illuminated by critical empowerment discourse nor frequently asked from within that discourse. Roger Simon's (1988) recent piece in the Critical Pedagogy Networker is an exception in terms of at least posing some of these difficult questions and inviting others to respond. In the next section of the paper I argue, and attempt to demonstrate, that attention to specific contexts, and specifically to the contexts of teaching and teacher education, may be a way out of some of the dualisms and dilemmas.

Context as a way out?

Recently the term empowerment has been taken up (and deconstructed) within post-structural and post-modernist discourses which emphasize a "more hesitant and partial scholarship", deny claims of totality and certainty (Lather, 1989, p.26), and acknowledge the "unknowable" (Ellsworth, 1988). It would seem that this approach might minimize the arrogance and manipulation that exists in other discourses of empowerment. Empowerment can be problematized through poststructural analyses which emphasize the social constructedness of our social positions and the multiplicity and contradictions of power relations.

An emphasis on the notion of context helps shift the problem from the dualisms of power/powerlessness, and dominant/subordinate, that is, from purely oppositional stances, to a problem of multiplicity and contradiction. Hence rather than embrace a notion of empowerment or emancipation which assumes a fundamental imbalance of power between social actors, it may be more helpful to think of negotiating actions within particular contexts. I hasten to add here that I am not advocating a notion of context as simply a pseudonym/ synonym for the present or the immediate. Rather I view context

as filled with social actors, with histories of group identity and identification/ oppression and privilege which cut across specific individuals. That is, individual histories and biographies are viewed within the context of broader social patterns.

A turn to the structure/agency debate in contemporary social theory is helpful in emphasizing this point. Ahistorical and decontextualized views of agency, such as Giddens' (1979) notion of agency as the capacity to "act otherwise", are easily linked to actions for which the consequences are irrelevant to anything but the immediate and the personal. This is precisely a danger which faces empowerment discourses, enabling the term's use in disparate ways. While Giddens emphasizes time and space in his theory of structuration and is concerned with political strategy, a notion of agency like his can too easily be linked to everyday behavior and so become synonymous with either activity or doing (Dallmayr, 1982). Anderson (1980) points out the problem that agency may be so encompassing of all human endeavor as to become meaningless. He sets up a hierarchy of three types of goals that agents pursue and distinguishes them according to their historical relevance: (1) the private goals which we typically pursue in our daily lives, (2) collective projects which are pursued within a taken-for-granted social structure, and (3) "those collective projects which have sought to render their initiators authors of their collective existence as a whole, in a conscious programme aimed at creating or remodelling whole social structures" (Anderson, 1980, p.20). To return briefly to empowerment, in light of this analysis, we might ask of what historical relevance it is to be named "teacher of the year". Although this returns us to questions of who is

to determine what is historically relevant, Anderson's hierarchy points to the need to examine our notions of agency.

A similar view is found in the work of Braudel (1980) who, in distinguishing between events, conjunctures and the longue duree (that is between short term or "microhistory", cycles and intercycles, and whole centuries or what we might call "macrohistory"), considers historical change as "not merely multi-dimensional,... but hierarchical. Clark (1985) characterizes Braudel's work and that of the Annales historians generally, as "distinguished above all by a view of human experience in which the individual agent and the individual occurrence cease to be the central elements in social explanation" (p.180). Braudel's contempt for a history of events is blatant in the following passage in which he compares events to a display of fireflies which he had once seen in Brazil: "their pale lights glowed, went out, shone again, all without piercing the night with any true illumination. So it is with events: beyond their glow, darkness prevails" (cited in Clark, 1985, p.184).

Like Anderson's hierarchy of agents' goals, Braudel's hierarchy leads us to a "history without people" in which structures create reality. Clark (1985) points to a shift in the more recent Annales scholarship which has made the study of the event respectable as the focus of a "problem-centred history which spreads ever outwards, ...from the 'text' to the 'context'" (p.196). This shift in Annales historical scholarship can be seen as consistent with the work of poststructuralists and other contemporary social theorists, like Giddens, who (perhaps with limited success) attempt to do away with dichotomies such as structure-agency, past-present, event-longue duree.

Contexts of teacher empowerment

What do these positions on agency, events and structures tell us about the possibilities of teacher empowerment? Connell (1987) states the dialectical position:

> practice can be turned against what constrains it; so structure can be deliberately the object of practice. But practice cannot escape structure, cannot float free from its circumstances (any more than social actors are simply bearers of the structure). It is always obliged to reckon with the constraints that are the precipitate of history. (p.95)

Whether one accepts a position like Connell's, or chooses an ahistorical view of agency which focuses on events and individuals, will influence how questions about desirable and justifiable means and ends in the name of empowerment are answered. Conceptions of what constitutes empowerment, emancipation or domination will differ according to one's (perhaps unarticulated) position in the structure/ agency debate. Maeroff's book, for example, takes a view of agency which has little, if anything, to do with collective action for social transformation. His sense of agency means that empowerment <u>is</u> possible, but empowerment in a restricted and individualistic sense which is most likely to maintain existing arrangements.

A more historical and political sense of agency leads to us to view the potential for teacher empowerment -- empowerment as linked to freedom, equality and justice -- as problematic. With some sense of historically relevant action, we are less likely to glorify or romanticize the individual case (event) in which, for example, sexism is confronted and challenged in the classroom while at the same time female teachers continue to tolerate certain work conditions and relations that contribute to their personal and

collective oppression. Attempts to empower students in teacher education programs will be made, cognizant of the structural constraints that are likely to be encountered such as students' overwhelming concern with grades in a system which encourages competition; students' unwillingness to be critical, for example, of a system which has brought them individual success; and features of school organization which will diminish the capacity of young teachers to bring about any significant change. A dialectical position helps us to surpass the pessimism which results from the structuralist tendencies of thinkers like Anderson and Braudel and temper the optimism found in work like that of Giddens.

I want to return now to the specific contexts of teaching and teacher education within which the discourses of teacher empowerment are created and within which many of us work. I am not proposing context as something entirely new to discourses of teacher empowerment: if we focus on critical discourses it is clear that their analyses of oppression are rooted in particular contexts. Giroux, McLaren and Simon situate their theories in context; context at a fairly abstract level, rather than, for instance, at the level of the personal or the event. Ellsworth's (1988) recent work, critical of this abstraction, demonstrates an approach to teaching (though not in teacher education) which addresses context at a quite different level. Ellsworth's teaching centered on "actual, historically specific struggles, such as those between minority students and university administrators" (p.6). There are clearly elements of similarity between these two projects in terms of their focus on social relations, even though they are delivered at quite disparate levels of analysis: one which seems to be aimed at the development of grand theory, and hence is abstract and

removed from local contexts; the other which is very deliberately restricted to specific manifestations of historical struggles.

In teaching and teacher education, commonalities between our specific situations are clearly identifiable: there are objective relations that exist (in all universities, for example), independent of the particular contexts (UW-Madison, for example) in which we work. For example, in this country and my own (Australia), all teacher education programs include professors, lecturers and/or teaching assistants who are placed in positions of authority over students. All teacher education programs are related in some way to schools and school systems. In most teacher education programs, men are found in positions of authority while women, as students (particularly in elementary education programs), find themselves subservient to those authorities. At yet another level of context we find that the teaching force in Australia is comprised of many more women than men, as it is here; people of color in Australia have a difficult time gaining access to higher education, as they do here; both societies feel the tensions of a class-based capitalist society. These are, as Walkerdine (1985) puts it, the "apparatuses of our present". There are however many counter-hegemonic locations within which we can struggle and possibilities for creating other alternatives.

I agree with the impulse to fill in some of the gaps left by the abstractness of the critical discourse of empowerment. As Miedema (1987) claims, we should not get bogged down in social theory, social analysis and social criticism. "In the movement toward daily action and daily life the concrete subjects of flesh and blood must be recognizable" (p.227). We need to concern ourselves with our own practice and with the people with whom we

work. Perhaps we need to start asking what "empowerment" means to students and teachers; what, if any, difference is made to their lives, as teachers and people, through our attempts at empowerment? At the same time we can avoid the relativism and accusations of "navel gazing" that come with too narrow a focus on our own contexts. Those contexts need to be defined historically and politically with acknowledgement of the commonalities that connect us across the uniqueness of our local struggles.

Finally, I want to advocate an examination of our own interests in the rhetoric of empowerment. It seems contradictory to aim to construct theories of empowerment that are not linked to particular projects and hence contradictory to "seek a knowledge which claims itself as true for all people, places, times" (Walkerdine, 1985, p.239). Narayan (1988) proposes that we should engage in our work with others with "methodological humility" and "methodological caution". That is, as "outsiders" to the students or teachers with whom we are working, we should assume that we may be missing something, and that in our talk/writing about others we should not dismiss the validity of their points of view. If our interest in teacher empowerment is an interest in improving the conditions of teachers' lives and work, and not a purely rhetorical interest, it seems to me particularly relevant to act with humility and caution as we rethink our conceptions of, and continue our struggles for, teacher empowerment.

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Notes

[1] I intend to include an analysis of feminist discourses of empowerment in a later version of this paper.

[2] I acknowledge that Giroux, McLaren and Simon would maintain that there are significant differences between their individual positions.

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